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Collaborative Marketing for Electronic Resources

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Collaborative Marketing for Electronic Resources

Abstract:

Purpose. The project outlined in this article is designed to answer the question, "Is a collaborative model of benchmarking the marketing of electronic resources feasible?"

Design. The project is designed as a national working group of around 100 college and university libraries all moving together through the process of a typical marketing cycle, running a brief marketing campaign, and reporting findings. All participating institutions will perform these steps at the same time, beginning in October 2011 and completing the project at the end of February 2012.

Findings. Based on the data gathered as the result of the project we hope to determine if college and universities working together and sharing data can help to define "best practices" in marketing of electronic resources using a collaborative model.

Originality. The literature in the area of marketing of electronic resources in libraries is sparse, and as a result we cannot easily determine a path for successful marketing of our resources. This project proposes a model to quickly educate and gather data to begin building best practices in the area of marketing electronic resources.

Keywords: electronic resources; collaboration; marketing; marketing campaign; assessment

Classification: Research paper

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Introduction: Connecting patrons to appropriate resources is a concern for libraries as more collections are removed from traditional shelves and placed in virtual spaces. The traditional marketing techniques of placing a new-books shelf near the front door or the positioning of ready reference volumes in a study area of a library does not apply to the electronic resource world because there are no physical volumes to view. How, then, do libraries effectively connect patrons to the most appropriate electronic resources for their information needs?

In an era in which libraries need to prove that their activities are fiscally responsible it is vital to understand library efficacy in marketing electronic resources to patrons. Two recent analyses of articles published by libraries about their marketing plans for electronic resources demonstrate that libraries do not generally plan for marketing so that the process gains them actionable knowledge for further marketing efforts (Kennedy, 2010, 2011). The analyses of the published articles find that libraries do not choose appropriate strategies for their stated marketing goals for their electronic resources and do not correctly measure the strategies, which leaves them unable to assess their efforts; without a clear understanding if their marketing campaigns have been successes or failures libraries are not positioned to move forward in new marketing cycles.

Designing a marketing plan before beginning any marketing activities should lead a library to clearly state the goal for the plan, which should lead to choosing a strategy to achieve that goal, and deciding how to measure the strategy so that it will tell a library if the campaign has helped to reach the goal. The content analysis described in Kennedy's 2010 article, of twenty-three published articles about library actual marketing plans demonstrates that only three of those libraries were clear about those steps. It is obvious that more than twenty-three libraries have

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marketing campaigns in place, but since the published literature on the topic of marketing for electronic resources is so sparse, we are at a loss to know their actual behaviors. As a result, libraries that are conducting marketing are doing so independently, without a body of evidence and a profession of experience to draw from.

Libraries understand the need to market yet generally fail to develop a plan to do so. The literature suggests that this is due to marketing not being a priority for library administrators and librarians not knowing how to design a marketing plan (Lindsay, 2004). The result of this uneven attention to marketing of electronic resources is that no "best practices" can be identified from the literature, and a path for success in marketing electronic resources is not evident. That libraries have no generally accepted processes to follow for the marketing of their electronic resources is especially problematic in today's environment with pressures to justify how monies and staff time are spent. The author wondered if there was a way to educate quickly and widely on the steps of designing a marketing plan, and then use the data generated from that process to rapidly determine if a collaborative approach to marketing was effective in identifying at least one best practice for marketing electronic resources.

In this article the author describes a national distributed project designed to determine if "best practices" for marketing electronic resources can be defined collaboratively. The project is intended to answer the question, "Is a collaborative model of benchmarking the marketing of electronic resources feasible?" A five-month national project – also outline here -- is planned for college and university libraries to test the model.

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Proposed Methodology: Using a benchmarking framework merged with a traditional cycle of marketing, the following steps are proposed to test a collaborative approach to identifying best practices in marketing an electronic resource (Boxwell, 1994). Since there is not enough published literature about marketing for electronic resources, we assume a baseline of anecdotal information only. This project proposes that a working group of around 100 college and university libraries perform the same marketing technique at the same time so that data can be gathered and compared, leaving us with a body of fact-based information from which we can make decisions.

1. Decide what to benchmark. For this project we will be evaluating if two emails to internal library staff with tutorials on how to use a particular electronic resource increase confidence and competence in the use of the resource. The marketing literature notes that as front-line staff are supported with information about products (or in the case of the library, information about electronic resources) they will share that information with patrons (Kotler and Keller, 2006). Our efforts for this project, therefore, will focus on our own library staff.

By gathering data on the actual use of the electronic resource and summarizing the results of a survey we hope to be able to determine if the marketing technique of sending emails to internal library staff is generally effective; in the aggregate the data should tell us if this is generally a good technique to use in a university or college library setting, if it can be considered a "best practice."

2. Plan the benchmark project. Each university participating in the project will act independently in the steps of the marketing cycle but will share their progress via a wiki. The project will begin in early October 2011 and complete at the end of February 2012,

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with sensitivity to seasonal holiday scheduling: 3 months (October-December 2011) – Preparation (steps 1-10 of the marketing cycle); 1 month (January 2012) – Campaign; 1 month (February 2012) – Assessment and evaluation (steps 11-12 of the marketing cycle).

3. Understand your own performance. In an effort to define the process of marketing for themselves, each university will write about and share the following steps, which are the components of a typical marketing cycle seen in Figure 1: write a project description (for this project the general plan has already been defined and the libraries will be describing it in their own words); define their current market; perform a cursory SWOT analysis; identify their target market (for this project, the target market has already been identified as internal library staff; note their marketing goals and objectives (this is generally more broadly accomplished, but for this project is narrowly defined to one small marketing campaign); identify marketing strategies (for this project, the marketing strategy has already been identified as email); define an action plan (for this project all participants will have the same action plan); perform the marketing campaign; gather data via usage statistics and a brief survey; assess the effectiveness of the campaign.



Figure 1: Marketing cycle

Key components of this benchmarking step will be guided by the model described in Figure 2, designed to assist in assessing a library's efficacy in marketing plan development (Kennedy, 2010). The model is designed to prompt for answers to the following four questions: Is there a clearly stated goal; Does the strategy match the goal; Is the strategy measured; Does the data provide actionable knowledge.

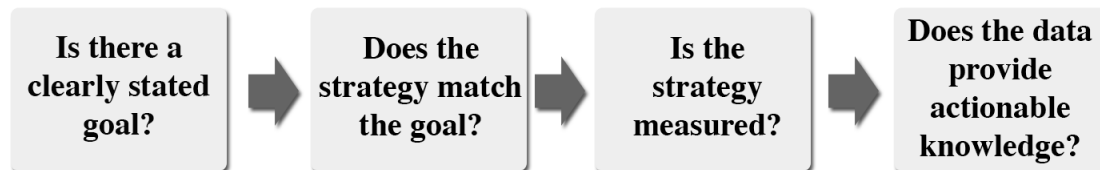


Figure 2: Efficacy model

4. Study others. Since all of the steps above will be shared in writing via a wiki it will be easy to compare how other universities accomplished each step, in order to see if their processes were more/less effective than one's own. Brief demographic information will be gathered from participating libraries to allow other participants to identify similar institutions.

As already stated, the literature reporting the clear steps a library takes in the development of a marketing plan is sparse. By sharing via wiki it is hoped that we can learn while doing, speeding up the process of disseminating information about the process. In this way it takes the publishing time lag out of the equation but still provides a kind of peer review process, by allowing commentary by other participating institutions to shape and mold our plans.

5. Learn from the data. For this project we hope to learn from the data in aggregate to tell us if the marketing technique of emails to internal library staff is effective in university and college libraries.
6. Use the findings. In addition to the data serving the population in aggregate, each participating university or college can see how their methods may be improved by incorporating what other universities/colleges have done.

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Potential Learning Outcomes and Findings: By participating in this proposed

collaborative working group a university or college library can expect to:

1. Learn how to employ a typical marketing plan at its library.
2. Complete one marketing campaign from start to finish.
3. Contribute to a national project that will help determine if collaborative benchmarking for marketing electronic resources is feasible.

The goal of this project, merging benchmarking with marketing, is designed to answer the question, "Is a collaborative model of benchmarking the marketing of electronic resources feasible?" If the data show us that an email marketing campaign to internal library staff is effective in college and university library settings, it is possible that a collaborative model can be used to test other marketing techniques, to increase the body of knowledge surrounding "best practices" in marketing electronic resources. A benefit for the participating institutions is that they contribute their data to this project, but also learn the practical steps of developing a marketing plan for their libraries.

The project will be lead by the author, who has researched extensively on the topic of marketing electronic resources. The project was announced at the recent conference of the Association of Colleges and Research Libraries, and many institutions have already signed on to the project; there is room for more participants, and the author invites you to make contact if your library is interested in being part of this working group.

(Pre-print)

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